PRACTITIONERS' VIEWS ABOUT THE USE OF BUSINESS EMAIL WITHIN ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS: IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPING STUDENT GENERIC COMPETENCE

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Although extensive research has been done on teaching emails and on the use of emails in organisations, little research exists about how to incorporate organizational practitioners' views as the voices of the community of social practice. To remedy this pedagogical gap, this article uses a genre approach to discuss organizational practitioners' views on the use of email in organizational settings. It also develops seven teaching and learning stages for situated learning and teaching in business communication based upon the presented study findings.

Keywords: *business email; generic competence; organizational practitioners' viewpoints; situated learning*

BUSINESS EMAIL IS commonly recognized and accepted as an important form of workplace communication (Markus, 1994), which is well known for its speed and accountability (e.g., Gimenez, 2005; Zhu, 2005). Extensive research has been conducted on email writing and the social roles of emails (e.g., Bjørge, 2007; Hartman, Lewis, & Powell, 2002; Nantz & Drexel, 1995; Rymer, 1998). Although business email has been included in textbooks as a form of organizational communication, specific ways of instructing students about designing and using business emails need to be explored. This article particularly pays attention to situated learning about business emails by focusing upon business email as an organizational communication genre. Since organizational communication genres are used and situated in specific social and cultural context (Berkenkotter &

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Huckin, 1993), it is essential to know what organizational practitioners (i.e., employees working within an organizational community) say about email-based communication within their specific organizational settings. More importantly, we need to explore the ways of incorporating their views into teaching and enhancing student learning. In this study, we use a communicative genre perspective to summarize and discuss a portion of interviews conducted within two North American organizations.

A genre is a type of text embedded in communicative activities of daily and professional life (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993). An organizational genre is composed of the communicative purpose, or action performed, and the form (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992), which is characterized by structural and linguistic features such as medium and language or symbol system. Both the accepted purpose and form emerge over time, thusly producing informal genre norms (Yates, Orlikowski, & Okamura, 1995). Moreover, multiple communicative genres enacted within a given community create what has been termed as a communicative genre repertoire (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994). This article identifies and illustrates both the purpose and form of a business email genre based upon the study findings. In addition, we also address the interaction between business email with other communicative genres within the repertoire of the telephone call, voicemail, and written memos and postings, and in doing so illustrate the inter-textuality of communicative genres. The article concludes with recommendations for teaching and learning about business email communication genres.

Our research data were collected from an engineering company (EngCorp) and a public television station (TVS), both located on the West Coast of the United States. These organizations were appropriate for this study because in both cases, the organizational practitioners had access to a variety of communication media, of which email was one. EngCorp has an international client base, while TVS is responsive to a localized community-based clientele. The EngCorp participants undertook such activities as creating cost proposals for clients, managing venture relations, providing marketing and support, running distance-learning programs, and engaging in administrative and executive support, all in conjunction with the major focus upon engineering. Some of the TVS members' tasks encompassed

computer and Inter/intranet support and development, human resource management, subscribers' services, product marketing, and brand development.

The data consist of 40 interviews relating to the use of all available communication media within each organization. The interviews were 30 minutes to 1 hour in length and were conducted at the offices of the participating organizations. Within these interviews, the participants were asked to identify specific organizational communication events. Based upon this information, more refined information was elicited about the specific medium involved and the participants' understanding about both sending and receiving communication via that particular medium.

The interviews were transcribed and interpretively analyzed using a Hymesian inspired "SPEAKING" descriptive framework (Hymes, 1972; Saville-Troike, 1982). The framework as used herein is made up of eight discrete contextual components (Saville-Troike, 1982), which specifically highlight elements of communicative acts or events. Within this framework,

S stands for the speech situation, which describes both setting and scene.
P designates the participants (speaker, sender, or addresser; hearer, receiver, audience, or addressee).
E recognizes the ends based upon the outcomes or goals of the act or event.
A acknowledges the act characteristics by looking at the message form and the message content.
K characterizes the key (tone, manner, or spirit) of the act or event.
I represents the instrumentalities and is based upon the channel (oral, written, telegraphic, semaphore, or other medium of transmission of speech) and the form of speech (language and dialect, codes, and varieties and registers).
N signifies the norms of interpretation and interaction (specific behaviors and properties) guiding the communicative act or event.
G accounts for the genre (poem, myth, tale, story, etc.).

We deemed this framework suitable for the analytic task since the framework specially captures the purpose, form, and genre and does so in a manner that promotes an understanding of the specific contextual

Table 1. Purposes Identified in the Interviews

Purpose	*Definition*
Getting work done	to accomplish a work-related task
Talking	to talk about some aspect of the meeting process
Reminding	to remind individuals of action items
Recording	to document communicative interaction
Asking	to ask questions
Requesting	to request information

manifestation of the genre patterns. We focused upon normative expectations regarding email as opposed to actual email interaction because our focus is upon understanding organizational practitioners' knowledge about their own practices. While looking at actual email interaction may have enabled us to understand what these patterns were, this method would not have revealed organizational knowledge about the efficacy and propriety of communicative interaction (Philipsen, 1992). The following findings are illustrations of facets of this organizational knowledge about email.

ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTITIONERS' VIEWS: THE GENERIC PURPOSE OF BUSINESS EMAIL

The preponderance of the participants' accounts of their use of business email communication identified an instrumental purpose of *getting work done*. The specific purposes included within the process of *getting work done* were *talking*, *reminding*, *recording*, *asking*, and *requesting* (see Table 1). Interestingly, as illustrated by the excerpted interviews presented below, this instrumental purpose differentiates business email from other organizational communication genres.

This instrumental purpose of business email is nicely captured by the following participant statement:

Interviewer: So, you've made an initial contact with a person via the phone. Do you stay with the phone?

Participant: It depends on how personal it is. You know, like, if I feel like saying hello to that person, I call them. If I need to get something done, I'll email them. So, it just depends on how personable you want that relationship to be.

As this participant talked about her use of two modes of communication, she suggested that certain types or qualities of relationships were associated with the use of each one. Specifically, she stated that the choice between email and the telephone depended upon *how personal it is* and *how personable you want the relationship to be*. To make her point, she connected *saying hello* with the act of *call[ing]* another person and *get[ting] something done* with *email*. As such, one purpose associated with the business email-based genre is that of getting work done, a clearly more instrumental purpose than the more relationally oriented purpose of the telephone call.

This sentiment was repeated by other participants, one of whom stated that email was one of the *better tools for business* in part because the medium *doesn't oblige you to go into those human factors*, which *is a plus and a minus, but for business it tends to be a plus a lot of the times*. While the participant did not specifically indicate what these human factors were, we believe that he was talking about the same interpersonal or relational interaction identified above. This is not to suggest that the telephone or business email is inherently either relational or instrumental; instead, we argue that within these contexts, there is a normative standard that the purpose of business-based email communication is instrumental rather than relational.

In addition to identifying the normative standards regarding the accepted purpose of business email, it is equally important to understand what does not constitute normatively sanctioned purposes for business email use. The participants identified two purposes that fell beyond the purview of acceptable use of the business email genre. Firstly, they noted that email should not be used for the purposes of *building trust* or, secondly, for *dealing with people*. With regard to the first of these types of interactions, one of the participants observed,

> When there's the need to get a feel from someone of whether you can really trust them—this back to the business dealings. The handshake and the face-to-face contact you can get more in a minute or two of just standing there looking someone in the eye than you can in reams and reams of electronic communication.

Similarly, another participant stated,

> We do like to fly across the country and across the world to shake somebody's hand and say, "Hey, do we trust each other?" So, it's almost like a referencing point for the future. You know, so they can shake that hand and say we've built that trust—now it's ours to lose. In other words, I can go back home and now we can deal digitally, but now I know who you are.

Each of these statements about organizational communication is about trust. Trust is a relational concept in which one person possesses the "willingness to be vulnerable to another" (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, cited in Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). These participants understood trust to be an important relational component within business-based interaction, which was achieved not within email-based generic interaction but instead within face-to-face dyadic spoken business communication. Moreover, as noted by the second participant, once this trust is achieved, it is then possible to communicate via email. The point here is that the participants articulated a normative belief that email was inefficacious for the purposes of establishing trust.

As noted above, a second type of interaction not pursuant with the accepted purposes of generic email use was that of *dealing with people*, which is illustrated by the following participants' statements:

> **Participant:** I really rely on people's face expressions. Especially when I'm trying to deal with them.
> **Interviewer:** What do you mean by dealing with someone?
> **Participant:** In a negative way. Oh, geez, I've got to deal with them. I'd rather just talk to them about something that's a little tense than send an email because it's really hard to express appropriately.

Furthermore, another participant stated,

> If you're having problems with somebody, you need to connect. Or not connect—see what's going to happen. Human-to-human. In a room, you know. Is it work load? Can you deal with that person? You know, stuff you can't get with email. You don't get personality on email.

In summary, the collected data revealed that many of these participants understood and were able to articulate both the accepted and

Table 2. Forms Identified in the Interviews

Form	*Definintion*
Work-related	message consists of only work-related and not phatic communication
Concrete	message is direct and to the point
Specific	message contains numeric data
Descriptive	message describes some object or process
Correct	message is worded correctly

the nonaccepted purposes of business-based email interaction. Within the following section, we address the normative standards pertaining to the forms of the business email genre.

ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTITIONERS' VIEWS: THE GENERIC FORM OF BUSINESS EMAIL

Table 2 summarizes the generic forms identified by some of the participants.

Reflecting upon the content of this table, we would suggest that the characterization of the form, or more specifically the content of business email communicative genres, as work-related is a broader thematic instantiation of other individually identified features of form (i.e., concrete, specific, descriptive, and correct). Moreover, as the participants talked about their use of business email, they noted an appreciation for the form precisely because the normative constraints of the generic form of business email communication did not necessitate the inclusion of relational content. Consider the following statement:

> I will email her more than get up and go ask her something. She screens programs. She's often got her headsets on: I don't want to interrupt her. I don't want to deal with it. There are other people who talk too much. So, it's easier for me to email them than to go and get engaged in a deep conversation or something. So, for me, it's pretty efficient.

Here, the absence of *talk* or *deep conversation* is a significant characteristic of business email interaction. Colloquially, a deep conversation denotes a type of communicative interaction in which some sort of personal disclosure takes place between two individuals

at a minimum. In addition, talk as communicative action has been linked by others (Baxter, 1993) to a form of organizational interaction in which the unique individual is in some manner recognized. As such, we conclude that business email is different from talk and deep conversation at least in part because of a genre norm promoting the exclusion of the type of interpersonal relational communication that one would find in talk or deep conversation. This finding is consistent with other research that has noted that business email can be depersonalized (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) and creates social distance (Markus, 1994). However, it is the lack of phatic elements and the preponderance of the instrumental content within business email form that renders the medium particularly desirable for achieving work-based interaction.

In addition to the lack of social or relational content, many of the organizational practitioners identified a lack of emotional content within business email. For example, comparing business email to voicemail, a participant noted, *I don't very often feel that we get email around here with much emotion in them. Maybe a little more [emotion] in a voicemail*. Again, making a contrastive statement between email and other communication genres, another participant stated, *You can see what's going on emotionally with people face-to-face, and also they can see yours because I think with email [and] voicemail not so much*. While these participants are not in accord regarding the emotional content of voicemail, they both point clearly to a shared belief that the business email genre does not normally include emotional content.

In summary, we do not wish to suggest that all business email interaction is inherently devoid of emotion or relational content because studies exist that suggest that some email interaction can indeed exchange socio-emotional content (Rice & Love, 1987) and develop and sustain interpersonal relationships (Walther, 1992, 2005; Walther & Burgoon, 1992). Indeed, Walther (1996) argues that it is the context that shapes the degree to which computer-mediated interaction is more or less impersonal or interpersonal. In summary, our findings suggest that there are specific genre norms guiding the type of form deemed suitable for business email-based interaction that eschews the inclusion of socio-emotional content.

INTERACTION OF BUSINESS EMAIL WITH OTHER COMMUNICATIVE GENRES

In their critique of organizational discourse and new media, Boczkowski and Orlikowski (2004) note that the focus upon an isolated medium provides an incomplete understanding of the medium because organizational discourse is a "complex ensemble of media, practices, artifacts and experiences" (p. 362). The idea of interacting texts is certainly not new, as seen by Bakhtin's (1986) notion of intertextuality, which refers to the dialogic interaction of texts with other texts. Metaphorically speaking, that is to say that each text "talks" to the others to the end of creating a conversation amongst the texts. We would suggest that this intertextuality can be seen within organizational genre repertoires. The following excerpted data attest to the intertextual play of communicative genres:

> If we're having an all-staff meeting. Generally, it's when people are doing something important like that, they're using every conceivable avenue of getting that out. They do it all. They'll email, voicemail, memo in the box, posting on the walls.

In this case, the participant identified a number of communication genres, each with the purpose of informing the organizational practitioners of an upcoming staff meeting. However, this is not the only message communicated because the presence of multiple genres conveying the same message creates a meta- or connotative message that the information is *something important*. In summary, the complex ensemble of communicative genres engenders the intertextuality that produces the meta-message for members within the organizational community. Having now presented examples of the findings, the discussion turns to focus upon the pedagogical implications of these findings.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the interviews can be translated into the teaching of business writing through attention to the concepts of generic competence and situated learning. Bhatia (1993) introduced the concept of "generic competence" in his analysis of English professional genres.

By generic competence, Bhatia refers to the students' ability to participate in and respond to recurring genres as part of the discourse community. In his more recent work on genre pedagogy, Bhatia (2004) further confirms generic competence as connecting textual competence and professional expertise. Genre competence has been used in genre teaching (e.g., Paltridge, 2001, 2002; Zhu, 2005) and can be applied to the teaching of business emails.

The relatedness between generic competence and professional expertise indicates the situatedness of genre education, hence, the relevance to situated cognition (e.g., Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Rogoff, 1990). One important situated aspect of learning focuses on interactive systems and the resulting "trajectories" of individual participation in real-life situations. Lave and Wenger (1991), for example, developed the notional concept of Legitimate Peripheral Participation that emphasizes the importance of participation in real situations as part of apprenticeship training. Incorporating employees' views can be seen as a form of situated learning as these views derive from specific real-life contexts.

Based upon the preceding findings, we recommend the following stages as a means of enhancing students' understanding of business email generic competence:

Stage 1. Incorporate organizational practitioners' views about the purpose and form of the communication genre as a way of exemplifying effective business email writing. The findings relating to the specific types of purposes served by a business email genre (talking about the meeting process, reminding individuals of action items, documenting communicative interaction, asking questions, and requesting information) and structure (work-related, concrete, specific, descriptive, and correct) should be discussed by the instructor as a way of understanding the communication genre. Based upon the study findings, students should be asked to write emails that reflect the specific purposes and the normative form of a business email. The outcomes of this activity are enhanced theoretical knowledge of the genre framework and practical application of organizational communication skills.

Stage 2. Following from Stage 1, knowledge gaps can be identified between the students and the organizational practitioners. While genre analysis has focused upon individual communities of users (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992), genres are applicable across

professions and organizations (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 2007). As such, the findings presented herein are potentially applicable to a number of organizational contexts; however, we recognize that what we have presented is not a definitive list. Based on our own experience of teaching student writing, one appropriate method is to compare student understanding with that of the professional members. The comparison should also involve a reflective process whereby the students usually spend some time brainstorming their understanding of what constitutes accepted and unaccepted purposes and forms of business-based email interaction. Both the instructors and students can focus upon both the students' beliefs and the organizational practitioners' knowledge as a means to beginning to socialize students as members of organizational communities of social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Stage 3. Identify to what extent a business email message can communicate instrumental-oriented and relation-related behaviors in specific organizational settings. This exercise can be conducted in small group discussions. The instructor can give students a variety of both task- and relationally oriented organizational scenarios or contexts and ask the students which communication medium they would use given the context and why. These scenarios can then be discussed in light of the findings presented within this article relating to the distinction between instrumental and relational interaction, such as *dealing with people*. Given that studies exist that suggest that in some organizational settings, email is deemed an appropriate means of addressing contentious interpersonal interaction (Markus, 1994), it is important that the students understand that email is not inherently instrumental or relational and that it is the context and cultural norms that shape the interaction. The instructor should also encourage students to think about their own organizational experiences in which they may have used email in a more relational than instrumental manner. This exercise leads to an understanding of the situated nature of email-based interaction, which can lead to substantive reflections on best business email practices.

Stage 4. Learn communicative genre interaction and the complementary and rhetorical nature of business emails. It should be highlighted that business emails, telephone, and face-to-face communication should go hand in hand so that we can communicate logos (facts and reason), pathos (emotion), and ethos (source credibility) effectively (Aristotle, 1991). The findings presented herein suggest that the business email is more likely to promote logical appeals (logos) as opposed to more emotive appeals (pathos). In terms of ethos, the findings relating to trustworthiness would suggest that email is deficient in terms of

promoting the character of the "orator." The findings point to a belief that other modes of communication, particularly face-to-face interaction or the telephone, are more effective in terms of establishing trust and conveying emotions. Students should be encouraged to think about how they would balance the three artistic modes of persuasion (Aristotle, 1991) given the communication media generally available within organizational contexts. Again, instructors can provide students with organizational scenarios or contexts, thus encouraging them to think about the relationship between persuasion and email. More specifically, an exercise such as this one would also promote a discussion of the role that the business email genre plays within a normatively unfolding communication event in which the different acts should be enacted by different communication genres.

Stage 5. This situated approach can also be extended to the global context. Communication genres are not immutable, as they "rise, change, and decline as needed to accomplish the work of a community" (Pope-Ruark, 2008, p. 186). As noted, the findings presented herein are representative of two organizations primarily located on the West Coast of the United States. Students who have experiences outside of the United States should be actively encouraged to discuss the similarities and differences between their experiences and the experiences of the organizational practitioners illustrated within this article. Instructors and students could explore the differences and similarities in terms of the contextual exigencies that promote specific generic forms and the implications for intercultural communication.

Stage 6. Introduce the students to the concept of intertextuality. The findings pertaining to the use of multiple genres to inform the organizational practitioners of an all-staff meeting can serve as an example of intertextuality. Students can then be asked to think about those situations that they have experienced in which multiple genres were used to convey the same message. This activity theoretically introduces the students to the concepts and, in addition, works towards their understanding the concept. Here, it is important to underscore the difference between the use of multiple genres to communicate the same message and the deployment of discrete genres within an unfolding communication event.

Stage 7. In the last stage, we move the discussion from one about teaching to one about learning. As noted previously, genres arise within communities, be it an individual organization, professional, commercial, or relational (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 2007), or indeed within multiple community memberships (Pope-Ruark, 2008). While these

findings have a level of generality that renders them useful in terms of student pedagogy, we recognized that the information presented is not universal. As such, it is important that students understand in what way studies such as this one can help to promote their learning. Learning is about appropriate acquisition of relevant knowledge, and this article has presented a specific theoretical framework for understanding organizational communicative processes and practices. Students can take with them an understanding of this framework that can serve them in terms of their own immersion with organizational cultures. This framework allows them to learn about and enact the situated genres within their organization, and in doing so, former students can start to develop the genre competence that marks them as members of their specific organizational culture.

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